

How volunteering now can make you a better medical student

JUN 12, 2019

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Volunteering with either a clinical or nonclinical organization can strengthen your medical school application. The experience also can prepare you for success when training starts. How? Let's take a look.

Admission aid

The kind of empathy practicing physicians must have to provide high-quality care is hard to measure, but volunteer hours indicate medical school applicants have concerns that extend beyond themselves.

In terms of the type of volunteer work medical schools look for, it varies. The Association of American Medical Colleges asked admissions officers to rate the importance of academic, experiential, demographic and interview data used by medical school admissions committees. That study reveals that community service and volunteer work—in both medical and nonmedical settings—were given the highest weight of any experiences.

Is there a benchmark for volunteer hours that medical schools consider? The conventional wisdom seems to be 100 hours.

But the way your volunteer work is viewed most certainly is going to be framed by your experiences, said Tonya Fancher, MD, MPH. She is associate dean for workforce innovation and community engagement at the University of California, Davis School of Medicine, one of the 37 members of the AMA Accelerating Change in Medical Education Consortium working together to create the medical schools of the future and transform physician training.

“Rather than check the box of ‘I worked in a lab, volunteered in a clinic and did an overseas mission trip,’ it's really more about how the choices you made help the interviewer understand who you are,” Dr. Fancher said.

“I am in awe of the students who come [into an interview] and say, ‘I started a clinic in Uganda, and I spent two weeks pulling teeth in Nicaragua.’ I never had the opportunity to do such things before entering medicine,” she added. “And there are students who say, ‘I volunteered in my neighborhood or in my church or I worked full time and put myself through school.’ Those are the stories I look for—they tell a story of community commitment and focus.”

Heart-happy work

Now a fourth-year medical student at the University of Mississippi School of Medicine in Jackson, AMA member Avani Patel’s medical school application included a variety of volunteer experiences. She shadowed at a local hospital, worked in a free clinic and also built homes for the needy through Habitat for Humanity.

“Volunteering gives you the chance to make a personal connection and find your place in health care,” she said. “I’d always seen doctors as heroes and I still do, but volunteering really gave me a chance to make that one-on-one connection. Even though I didn’t have the medical knowledge yet, it made me feel something bigger.”

As far as which type of volunteer work was more beneficial—the experiences that were more or less clinical—Patel sees both as being vital in her medical school application and her approach to patients during medical school.

“After [Habitat for Humanity], I knew I wasn’t an architect but the experience made me well-rounded,” she said. “The biggest thing is you never know what you’ll learn from people or what they’ll learn from you. Those experiences you can’t put a price tag on.”

“I want to leave my mark on the world and medicine is a great way to do it. The first step was getting experience with community service and leaving, at the end of the day, having done something that makes your heart happy.”

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